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## “Cities are Good for Us”: Assessment of Urban Attractiveness by Students

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**Abstract.** The article reveals the foundation of attractiveness of the city as a place of residence, as a place of realization of needs of student youth. The city, as a high-resource territory, becomes a factor in the formation of migration attitudes of the young generation, which acts as a driver for its successful functioning and development. Cities engage in global competition for human resources. The lack of competitive advantages (such as a favourable environment, high level of income, quality of life, developed infrastructure) is becoming a factor of outflow of youth to more attractive areas. In 2017, we conducted a sociological study of students of the city of Yekaterinburg (Russia). Based on a standardized survey of 200 students (71 men and 129 women), as well as on 8 in-depth interviews with 4 women and 4 men, the article argues that the factors of the city's attractiveness are the conditions contributing to the upward vertical mobility. The most attractive characteristic of the urban environment is the economic, environmental and socio-cultural sustainability, which creates the conditions for the successful implementation of life plans, initiative and innovation. When choosing a city for the realization of their interests, students consider the territory's ability to provide opportunities for informal interaction and free choice of everyday practices. These indicators of attractiveness demonstrate that students claim their right to the city: they change themselves by changing the city.

### 1. Introduction

Modern cities are becoming one of the determining factors of the intensification of territorial mobility of youth, as well as the source of fulfillment of wide range of needs and interests. The city forms social connections and relationships, production potential, spiritual life and cultural values of a person. Currently, approximately a half of all the world's inhabitants live in cities of different types. The number of urban population will continue to increase.

The city acts as a social support/core/foundation, which embodies the features of a social system and its culture. The city is the humanity's most consistent and generally successful attempt to transform the world they live in [1]. However, the city as the core of civilization experienced its highs and lows (O. Spengler [2], F. Braudel [3]). And it comes as no surprise that the concepts of the city, the urban way of life, the quality of urban environment and its attractiveness become the subject of research by sociologists (P. Saunders [4], W. Flanagan [5]), city planners, architects, political geographers, and economists (A. Amin [6], M. Dear [7], M. Drennan [8], P. Hall [9], N. Jayaram [10]).



The city is an artificial man-made habitat. Russian science and urban planning practice have accumulated vast experience in creating a favorable urban space. However, attention used to be focused on the sanitary and hygienic features and psychological comfort, which created the conditions for labor activity of the population. Nowadays, issues of creating a comfortable infrastructure and economic system of the city are being actualized. This is due to the fact that cities are participating in a global competition for human resources. Attracting young, promising, highly qualified professionals can be the key to further progressive development of the territory.

A big modern city, according to M. Castells [11], is not so much a territorial functionally designed space as a set of various flows: information, human, logistic, etc. This indicates the dynamism of social processes in the urban environment, the ability of the territory to respond quickly to the actual needs of people. The quality of life offered by the city implies equality in the access and use of the advantages of the urban environment. In this regard, we refer to the D. Harvey's concept [12], which asserts the right to the city. In this case, the right to the city is more than just the right of individual access to the resources that the city provides. This is the right of the residents to change themselves by changing the city. Hence, the city acts as a factor in the formation of a special social type of personality – an urbanite who has certain stereotypes, values and attitudes. Urbanites, according to L. Wirth [13], attach great importance to the opportunities and conditions of social mobility.

Urbanites perceive the city not as separate elements (buildings, streets, monuments), but as a whole space. Despite the similarity of building types, every city has a unique urban landscape [14]. The city landscape is a part of the value perception of the city image. The value perception allows people to maintain their emotional state [15], social well-being, and satisfaction with the territory. Emergence and manifestation of feelings of attachment to the city becomes the basis for the formation of the territorial identity of a city resident. This process occurs through the allocation of special symbolic places, which are endowed with certain meanings and which form the city image [16]. The city image is becoming one of the factors of formation of migration attitudes. The city population will increase if the city attracts people with its quality of life, developed infrastructure, favorable environment, high income, favorable geographical position. The absence or loss of competitive advantages is the basis of the outflow of population to more attractive territories. Accordingly, one of the strategic objectives of city administrations is to create and maintain the image of a city as a preferable place for migration, especially among the younger generation, which is a resource for the transformation and development of the city. Territories with a positive image have significant advantages: when young people are "attached" to the city, it is easier to integrate them into the urban environment, to socialize them, to construct their identity.

## 2. Materials and Methods

The main goal of the study was to analyze students' ideas about the attractive characteristics of a city as a living space capable of fulfilling their needs and interests. To achieve this goal, we put forward the following research tasks. Firstly, to determine the system of factors assessing the attractiveness of the city. Secondly, to identify the mechanism of selection of a city of residence in life plans of young people. Thirdly, to describe students' expectations from the city of their future residence.

Primary data was collected using a standardized survey of Bachelor students of universities in Yekaterinburg (Russia). 200 people participated in the survey: 71 men and 129 women. 58% of respondents are educational migrants, i.e. Yekaterinburg is not the city of their birth. Students were interviewed in their free time in May-June, 2017. The average duration of filling in the questionnaire was 20 minutes. The authors created a standardized survey guide consisting of 12 questions. Respondents were also given the opportunity to formulate their own opinions by responding to open and semi-closed questions. The obtained data was processed using the SPSS statistical analysis package (version 20).

There was also a series of in-depth interviews with 8 students (4 men, 4 women), who participated in a standardized survey. During the interview, we explored life strategies of students. The questionnaire consisted of 14 questions. Respondents were given the opportunity to formulate their

own opinions by answering these questions. The duration of the interview was 35 minutes. The following topics were discussed during the interview: professional and career plans, image of the desired future, including the desired place of residence and realization of current needs of the informants. The next step in our study was the transcription of obtained interview texts. After that, the respondents' answers to the same questions were grouped. The grouping made it possible to identify the commonality and specificity of the respondents' answers, which facilitated the interpretation of the obtained data.

### 3. Results and discussions

The study allowed us to identify four main directions of assessing the city as an attractive living environment: conditions for economic success, conditions for the manifestation of individuality, infrastructural comfort and wide openness of social ties. At the same time, all directions are internally ambiguous, often of contradictory dual nature.

Financial well-being and professional success are the core of the students' ideas about their desired future. The opportunity for professional growth is a leading factor in choosing a city of residence; it is important for 61% of respondents. Moreover, while money is considered to be a tool and a routine, the ultimate goal is described as "well-being". And in this context, the city becomes a certain guarantee of this possible well-being. The city not only expands the area of choice of profession, workplace, working conditions, it also creates a positive attitude to personal success in the area if the territory is marked as a "prosperous city", "prosperous district", etc.

At the same time, the city should be somewhat similar to the young people living in it – this is an important basis for territorial self-identification. If students see themselves as active and open, striving for self-realization, then the city should "respond" to these needs. *"Courage in expression of their views, rebelliousness - it has always been a part of young people. The advantage of the best city is its openness to everything new, to innovation. We are not afraid, and the city shouldn't be either"* (f, 20). The city becomes an environment where "it is impossible to lie down": *"Living an eventful life. I went for a walk with friends here, then went somewhere else, went for a drive, or to the bathhouse... Well, constant action"* (m, 21).

Active development and advancement in many areas becomes the city's significant competitive advantage. The variety of cultural events and opportunities for self-development of young people (workshops, webinars, sports facilities, etc.), as well as the development of trade infrastructure, are the "markers" that indicate the active city. Thus, catering enterprises (cafes, bars, restaurants - 83%), cinema and theaters (61%), and availability of goods and services (54%) were named as examples of leading areas of the city life in Yekaterinburg [17].

Such an active city cannot be absolutely safe, and this is perceived by students dialectically [18]. Risk is perceived as something unknown, as a potential opportunity, rather than danger. A new city can provide this unpredictability, unexpectedness like nothing else, giving a surge of positive emotions.

Confidence in the inevitability of personal success is one of the basic characteristics of the younger generation. In this individualized picture of success, one of their main fears is to remain an ordinary citizen of their hometown. *"When you choose a path, you need to have hope and believe that you will be the best in it. I don't want to be an ordinary musician in my city. I'd prefer to leave and risk, to become the best"* (m, 20).

42% of students are ready for a territorial mobility; they include a change of residence in their life plans and match the city's possibilities with their needs and goals. Such a predisposition is formed at the level of school graduates, especially in small and medium-sized cities, where the tendency for irrevocable migration prevails. The main vector of migration is a larger city, and the main motive is the lack of opportunities in the hometown [19].

Another dualism of the "perfect" city is revealed in the following context: the city of a new place of residence should not only provide an opportunity to produce new social ties, but also to ensure the possibility of maintaining the former, first and foremost familial, relationships. Moving to another city

is seen as a qualitative leap in the formation of autonomy and independence, but it is important to be able to maintain family traditions: *"we spend summers and winters, celebrate the New Year holidays, every year, at the grandmother's, this is our tradition, we all spend holidays together"* (f, 19). The city should be easily accessible in the transport infrastructure: it should be easy to leave it and to return.

Choosing a new city for the future life is a multi-faceted process. A rating scale of 1 to 4 was used to assess the attractiveness of living conditions, where 1 is the lowest score for the criterion and 4 is the highest. The system of indicators was represented by blocks of questions that comprehensively describe the various components of objective conditions of a city. The highest scores were given by students to such indicators of attractiveness as: the number of shopping centers and stores (3.62), the possibility of attending cultural events, leisure activities (3.21), the opportunity to get an education (3.28), the opportunity to realize their interests, self-development (3.05), the level of development of cultural institutions, cultural events (3.00), the availability of facilities for physical culture and sports (3.00). The city should be full of "third places" [20], it should provide the opportunity for informal communication and free choice of everyday practices.

However, how does a potential interest in a particular city appear? Availability of information on the Internet is important. Students browse websites of other cities, make friends from different universities and cities: *"we already know whether they like to study there or not, who studies there, whether they like it in this city, what experience they have there, how the city helps their self-development"* (m, 21). The need for friends from other cities is emphasized as a starting condition, a moral readiness: *"you already see yourself in the city, how you walk around those streets, and it stops being so scary"* (f, 19).

Finally, the duality of the "city for the young" is also connected to its historical context. All the cities that were given as examples of "ideal" options (St. Petersburg, Moscow, Rome, Berlin, etc.) are historical centers. According to the respondents, these centers represent classical history and preservation of cultural and historical heritage, as well as modern history, where the modern fate of the country and the world is decided. Young people do not want to live in a "faceless" city. Becoming a part of a "strong, historic city" and belonging to it can make young people envision their future involvement in occurring changes, make them feel the simultaneity of the city life and a person's life: *"It grows and changes with me, I will be pleased to see its changes in 10 years' time"* (f, 21).

#### 4. Conclusions

In general, we can draw the following conclusions based on the analysis.

The attractiveness of the city and the potential territorial mobility of students associated with it will be determined by their ideas about the urban environment's ability to fit their life plans and to become a platform of a career start.

The image of the "city for us" is closely connected to the ideas of students about their individual success and independence. The city cannot be "simple, calm" and "absolutely safe", since the innovative activity of young people will not be fulfilled in these conditions. However, it must be sustainably prosperous, give guarantees of economic, environmental, socio-cultural sustainability, which determines the strategic direction of policies in the areas of planning and design of urban space.

The dialectical nature of ideas about the "city of the future life" determines the inquisitive and uncertain nature of the mobility trajectory. The potential readiness to move, which is formed during the school years and is based on idealized ideas about ideal cities, later begins to rely on a system of rational indicators, preliminary on collection and analysis of information. This allows the inclusion of a mobility decision-making model in the system of various municipal, regional and federal programs.

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